

**We are living through the end-times of the** civilizing mission – universal human rights having been its most ubiquitous modern expression. As a form of secular Christianity, human rights were turned by Europeans into global rules through imperial power, then international law and organizations.

After 1945, Europe's long, slow moral and political decline was disguised for decades by US power. Now the West is fracturing. The world in which global rules were assumed to be secular, universal and non-negotiable is one built on the belief that there is a deep consensus about human rights worldwide – but this is only an assumption with plenty of countervailing evidence.

As power shifts – particularly to China, India and Southeast Asia – the United States has proven more interested in containing China and growing export markets around the Pacific than in human rights. The International Criminal Court will be left as a mausoleum in the sand dunes of The Hague, an Ozymandian symbol of hubris, last testament to the fading European dream of all humanity subject to one regime of global liberal law.

Nineteenth-century European humanism – from which humanitarianism, human rights and international justice stemmed – was a secular bourgeois ideology, a kind of religionless Protestantism.

It built a humanist totem out of the legacy of Christian notions of innocence and a social practice that tried to mediate and prevent suffering. This served various social functions. It created a sense of authenticity and transcendence in an increasingly *gruesome world*; it consolidated the new bourgeoisie's sense of itself as a coherent and progressive force; it papered over contradictions between growing inequality and violence on the one hand and the triumphs of industry, science and social engineering on the other; and it emboldened humanists to spread their vision worldwide in the name of civilization.

The catastrophe of the Second World War

and the Holocaust nearly destroyed this project. Only a series of bold institutional developments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Charter of the United Nations, the Genocide Convention, Nuremberg and the revised Geneva Conventions saved it. The importance of Nuremberg and the Holocaust would only increase over time as a way to give moral power to this new regime of global legal rules. But Europe was a spent force; Amnesty International, formed in 1961, a look back to the past, not a herald of the future.

## Human rights fill the void

Human rights took off in the 1970s, most obviously in US foreign policy and in the formation of what would become Human Rights Watch. The shifting balance of the Cold War towards the West after the Helsinki Final Act (1975) and the implosion of the Soviet Union through the 1980s reflected the end of the era of ideological contestation. In the United States (home of Human Rights Watch), the Left was something to fear while in Britain (home of Amnesty International) it was something whose failure was seen as obvious if regrettable.

In neither were Left politics seen as a progressive force likely to deliver social justice. Human rights were even seen as a way to fill the void. By the 1990s humanism had gone global: from 1993's Vienna Declaration to *ad hoc* criminal tribunals on the former Yugoslavia and on Rwanda; from the Rome Statute that created the International Criminal Court to the 'illegal but legitimate' Kosovo intervention that spawned the 'responsibility to protect' whose moment had come at last, so we were told, in Libya. But this is all a sunset mistaken for a dawn.

In reality the success of universal human rights may have more to do with their luxury status than their impact. They are a lifestyle brand equivalent to Louis Vuitton luggage and Rolex watches. As the middle class expands



A word cloud of human rights-related terms. The words are arranged in a circular pattern, with 'freedom' and 'human' being the largest. Other prominent words include 'right', 'country', 'respect', 'law', 'gender', 'family', 'everyone', 'peace', 'slavery', 'public', 'protection', 'justice', 'security', 'torture', 'unions', 'school', 'travel', 'marriage', 'information', 'treat', 'government', 'life', 'trade', 'language', 'wage', 'discrimination', 'opportunities', 'skills', 'help', 'secure', 'property', 'social', 'equality', 'culture', 'standard', 'imprison', 'declaration', 'harm', 'colon', 'equal', 'environment', 'legal', 'rights', 'minorities', 'order', 'protection', 'basic', 'education', 'community', 'possessions', 'flight', 'refugee', 'justice', 'security', 'torture', 'unions', 'school', 'travel', 'marriage', 'information', 'treat', 'government', 'life', 'trade', 'language', 'wage', 'discrimination', 'opportunities', 'skills', 'help', 'secure', 'property', 'social', 'equality', 'culture', 'standard', 'imprison', 'declaration', 'harm', 'colon', 'equal', 'environment', 'legal', 'rights', 'minorities'.

in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), more and more citizens in those countries will demand political participation and the right to enjoy what they see as the fruits of their own labours – but are they really going to pursue human rights for all?

Their Western comrades certainly haven't if the British government's current attitude to illegal immigrants is anything to go by. Market-based democracy will bring rights in its train but only to civil and political participation for an expanding élite, not to the sort of social justice and equality that might make a real difference to billions of the world's citizens.

### New – and not so new – players:

Then there is the global power shift. The relative decline of US power has come with the increasing influence of the BRICS. These states are not necessarily against human rights, although the record of Russia and China is particularly poor. But they will increasingly want a say over who decides global rules and what those rules should say.

These newly empowered states will challenge the authority claims of previously dominant powers in areas like global justice and humanitarian intervention, which many of them read as victim's justice and regime change. As a new version, in other words, of the old international game. The new rules and norms on which international organizations like the United Nations rely are principles that were not drawn up by the vast majority of the world's peoples, and for decades they have routinely seen powerful states declare hypocritical exceptions for themselves and their allies. The BRICS will both challenge this system and seek similar prerogatives for themselves. Either way, the outlook is bleak for further extension of the global human rights regime.

And religion is back (although in truth it never went away). That global rules were secular rules made sense when they were promoted by a secularizing Europe. But the rest of the world is not secularizing; it is if anything becoming more religious, whether in terms of conservative and charismatic Catholics, Islamists, evangelicals, Pentecostals or Mormons. In many parts of Asia, religion, on very different lines than the monotheistic religions of the book, never went away. In the US, religious observance retains a political and cultural salience almost unthinkable in Europe.

In other words, secular human rights argued for on the basis of international law and liberal morality face tough competitors in terms of social norms authorized by national and cultural traditions and gods. This contest will be particularly intense over the question of the 'natural family' and the rights of women and

of gay, lesbian and transsexual communities. This clash is increasingly evident in several international forums.

### Social justice?

What hope is there for the future? It is clear given the internal divergence of resources, influence and priorities that it makes little sense to talk of a singular global human rights movement.

When middle-class Westerners lose control over setting the priorities of the 'movement', they will exercise their financial veto and stop funding human rights work? The language of human rights will not vanish – it is ubiquitous in marketing, public diplomacy and social media. But what difference will it really make in an era of rollback? This world will be religious and secular, Christian and Islamic, gay and straight, homophobic and sexist. What was potentially progressive in the classic humanist vision will erode with the decline in the power of humanism to shape global norms and values at the elite level. But this may be an opportunity for social justice advocates to redefine human rights in ways that work better for their members, constituents and beneficiaries.

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Unseating Mubarak was the result of massive popular protest, not the efforts of Amnesty, Human Rights Watch or the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights. Change requires political leverage, and mass demands for the recognition of group entitlements may be the only way to get it. The transformation of the human rights world under multipolarity may be the beginning of a form of resistance that mobilizes people transnationally on a popular basis to demand social justice. Or it could signal the end of the human rights edifice as we know it, as the human rights movement loses its momentum as they lose control. Either way, the end-times are coming for the hegemony of civil and political rights within global human rights activism. ■

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